

Fear and Loathing in the Executive Suite: Why Leaders Avoid Blogging & Other Social Media

by Griff Wigley

Most every leader is feeling the effects of the waves of social media technologies that are increasingly washing up on the shores of their organizations. It's primarily been blogs since 2005 but now it's also Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Leaders cannot help but notice the demands for more organizational transparency, authenticity, responsiveness, and engagement from employees, customers, constituents, members, citizens, and the media—all of whom are increasingly adept at using social media technologies.

If you've been reluctant to use social media technologies *yourself* in your role as a leader, you're not alone.

The problem was noted as early as 2006 when the New York Times published an article titled [All the Internet's a Stage. Why Don't C.E.O.'s Use It?](#) Author Randall Stross cited only one active CEO blogger among the Fortune 500.



Fast forward to January, 2009 when social media consultant Steve Borsch authored a blog post titled [Why Executives Don't "Get" Social Media](#). When he asked one executive, the response was, "Because I'm getting sh*t done and I can't invest my attention or energy there."



In the spring of 2010, [Forrester CEO George Colony](#) published a series of blog posts titled *The Social CEO*. In [Part 1: Most CEOs Are Not Social](#) he noted that not only were few CEOs using social media, but that even CEOs of the big social media companies weren't exactly active users.

Colony and others have some theories about why so few executives use social media technologies such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube in their roles as leaders. In Part 2 of his series titled [CEOs Aren't Social For Good Reasons](#), Colony listed these factors:

- Age
- Risk and regulatory constraints
- Time
- The social heavy model breeds blowhards

In August, 2010, the principals of corporate social media consulting firm [DemingHill](#) published a paper titled [Why Executives HATE Social Media](#) citing that executives:

- are "non-narcissistic in a YouTube world"
- are inherently introverts and gravitate towards solitude versus socializing

- have difficulty with the lack of control required for social media to be fully unleashed
- fear and feel vulnerable around the technology in the social arena, even as they depend on it in other areas
- wonder if social media is yet another technology whose promises will go unfilled

In my work as a leadership blogging coach the past five years, I've heard all these reasons and a few others. In this paper, I address them and suggest some alternative ways to think about them.

Why Leaders Avoid Blogging and Other Social Media

1. Lack of time

"My days are packed, and increasingly, work is encroaching on my evenings and weekends. Why would I add regular blogging or tweeting to my to-do list?"

Blogging feels like just another task when you first start out, and it does require some time commitment to work it into your week. But once you experience feedback from your blogging, once you realize that not only are others who are important to you are reading your blog but that they're talking about it and spreading it to others, your attitude towards the task of blogging changes.

You start to realize that your blog leverages and magnifies your leadership in time-effective ways. You start to see it as a tool for increasing your influence.

Back in 2005, author, blogger, and marketing guru [Seth Godin](#) referred to this as

his [Leveraged Effort Curve](#):

Knowledge workers get paid extra when they show insight or daring or do what others can't. But packaging the knowledge is expensive, time consuming and not particularly enjoyable for most people. As you get better at what you do, it seems as though you spend more and more time on the packaging and less on the doing.



Blogging is an exception.

Once you get the system and the structure set up, five minutes of effort can give you four minutes of high-leverage idea time in front of the people you're trying to influence. [Blogging] allows ideas to be stripped down to their essence and allows you to really push. This is pure, unadulterated leverage. The stuff you actually get paid for, with no overhead.

2. Fear of an increase in the flood of electronic messages

"My email inbox is overflowing. I've got umpteen voicemails piled up waiting for me. I've got no choice on dealing with the onslaught of text messages on my mobile phone. If I start blogging or tweeting, it will just encourage people I don't know or care about to contact me."

Social media technologies don't necessarily require you to be more available electronically. You don't need to publish your email address. (A good alternative is to place a Contact Form on your blog that forwards comments to your email or your assistant's. You can then decide if a response is warranted.) You certainly don't need to publish your phone number. And people who follow you on Twitter

can't contact you through that service ('direct message') without your permission.

A blog can also *reduce* your time spent with email because you can answer your email with a blog post, which is an option that you didn't have before. It gives you the ability to respond to an individual so that all your readers can hear/read it. You leverage your response (there's that word *leverage* again) so that it has the potential to benefit the most.

You may have done something very similar to this when giving a speech. Someone near the front of the room raises their hand and asks you a question. You start to answer their question and someone towards the back of the room shouts out, "CAN YOU REPEAT THE QUESTION?!"

You repeat the question as you face the audience. Then you turn back to the questioner and, looking them in the eye, start with your response to them, with occasional glances at the audience. You're having a one-one conversation with the questioner while the rest of your audience listens to it. Your blog can work much the same way.

When you get an email, ask yourself: "Is replying to this person a good strategic use of my time and if so, could my blog audience benefit from my reply?" Instead of replying with a return email, consider *first* posting to your blog. "I got an email yesterday from a person who was wondering... Others might be interested in my response so I'm posting it here."

Then you can respond to the individual who made the initial contact with something like, "Great question. I've blogged my response in case others might be

interested.”

People will likely appreciate the attention you're giving them, whether or not they let you use their name.

3. Heightened legal risks

"My staff gets freaked when I talk to the media. They want everything filtered through them first. They'll go nuts if I started blogging or tweeting on my own. I don't need to be making their lives more difficult. Plus, what if I screw up and write something that increases the risk of litigation, runs afoul of our regulators, offends a customer, or angers employees or investors?"

It's the nature of many communications and legal staff to want to prevent problems, so they're understandably wary of unedited blogging and tweeting. Leaders of public companies obviously have additional factors to consider.

But if you're confident speaking to a reporter on the record, then there's no reason that this confidence can't carry over to blogging. When you sit down to write, you make a mental shift, knowing that your words are going to 'travel.' You know that this isn't journaling. You know how to be judicious even as you aim for the right degree of authenticity and transparency.

It's fine to have someone else you trust look over your blog post or tweet before you publish it. Just make sure that their suggested edits don't diminish your 'voice of authenticity' to the point where the post becomes boring or feels like a memo.

4. Social networking requires pointless socializing

"I don't see the value in constantly socializing with people I don't know."

And I don't see how it would scale: the more I'd interact, then the more people would expect me to interact. And from what I've read, people are nasty online. Why would I subject myself to that?"

In [Part 4 of his series](#), Colony challenges the notion that executives need to be heavily interactive (social) with their use of social media technologies:

Now admittedly, this is a far cry from the "Get into the conversation" conventional wisdom of the social heavies. And it contradicts the "Post incessantly to build followers" high-school behavior of many social players. But let's face facts—most CEO don't have the time or the capacity to play those games. They've got companies to run.

In his [post](#), Borsch cites Harvard social psychologist and author David McClelland's contention that human motivation comprises three dominant needs: the need for achievement, the need for power (influence), and the need for affiliation. Executives typically score high in achievement and power needs but *low in affiliation needs*.

Factor in low need for affiliation when you're pitching your boss, executives or client leadership on internet or web innovations that you think are a no-brainer to move forward on. Chances are they'll be less-than-interested in what you're proposing if it's all about social media connections.

A [Deming executive was dismissive](#) of the social elements of social networking:

To say that we are ANTI-social would be a huge misrepresentation, but when you combine the word "social" with "networking" – let's just say it sends shivers up my spine. Do I like the company of others? Sure I do – but I want the time to be well spent.

This is why it's helpful to think 'audience' instead of the term 'networking' if you're a leader considering how you can personally deploy these social media technologies. (This does not apply to how these technologies should be used by your organization. Just you.) Think of the tools as your collective bully pulpit, an effective way to reach your audience, with the 'networking' as optional.

Interaction via blog comments is not required for a leadership blog. Just like you can give a speech with no Q&A afterwards, your blog can be a one-way communications platform.

And if the time comes when you do decide that interaction would be advantageous, you can be selective. For example, you can:

- Enable comments on only one particular blog post.
- Set a time limit for comments on a post, e.g., take comments on a single post for only one week
- Enable comments but let people know that although you'll read the comments, you won't be participating. (You may want to later blog about the interaction or a comment.)
- Allow a comment to be published only if it's deemed helpful to the conversation

The skill of interacting online via your blog can be learned. It can be both rewarding and beneficial as a tool for listening and genuine engagement. But it's not a prerequisite and it's not an all-or-none proposition.

5. The literary skills required are too demanding

"I can handle giving a speech and being interviewed. But writing isn't one of my strong suits. I don't need the aggravation of staring at a blank electronic page, wondering what to blog or tweet about. And trying to craft meaningful stuff all the time would take more time than I'd care to devote."

If a friend or colleague asked you "What's happened at work lately that's been interesting?" you'd likely have no trouble answering. Your brain would shift immediately to remembering a recent incident or interaction and a short story about it would begin to flow.

That's the essence of a blog post. You're not writing a column or making a long speech but just doing a little strategic, near real-time, short storytelling. Everyone does it naturally in social situations or in informal conversations, so it's not a big leap to replicate that in blog post.

For example, one of the most effective ways to acknowledge someone informally is to *tell someone else a story about them*. Why? Because it has a better chance to spread.

A positive remark directly to the person being acknowledged generally goes no further because to most people it would feel like bragging to tell someone else. But if the positive remark is made to someone else, then the recipient is very likely to repeat the story to others.

A blog post recognizing an employee, a colleague, an organization, a customer, a vendor, a citizen, etc. is an effective way to accomplish the informal form of recognition with the impact of the formal.

Others see the blog post and mention it to the affirmed person; some pass around

via email to others; others blog it and retweet it, thereby widening its impact; and the search engines store the content of it indefinitely, thereby providing opportunities for serendipitous acknowledgment far into the future. All of that can happen with a simple story. Here's an example.

Paul Levy, President and CEO of [Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center](#) in Boston, maintains a leadership blog called [Running a hospital](#) where he regularly shares “thoughts about hospitals, medicine, and health care issues.” You can also follow [Levy on Twitter](#).

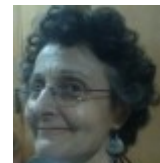


He regularly blogs the winner of their “Caller-Outer of the Month Award” given to an employee whose actions reflect one of their strategic initiatives.

The purpose of the award is not to recognize someone who has solved a problem, but rather to recognize someone on the staff who has noticed a problem and called it out. The idea is that call-outs lead to root cause analyses that enable us to fix problems systematically rather than engaging in work-arounds.

In March, 2009, he [blogged about Deborah Kravitz](#) who convinced Levy to tour her unit.

... I was able to see the terrible working conditions facing her and her colleagues as they try to carry out their job of sterilizing all of the surgical instruments used in the hospital's ORs. After some delay, Deborah nudged me again a few months later and pointed out that nothing had improved. So, we got to work on the problem and with the help of the CPD staff, are now on the path to a much healthier, safer, and efficient work environment.



With a short and simple story, Levy affirms an employee while indirectly and strategically sending a message to hundreds of other employees who read his blog that this type of behavior is important and valued. By putting the story into a blog post, he's leveraging it since it can then easily 'travel' via social media. His audience has audiences. And every time someone reads that post and then mentions it to Ms. Kravitz, the affirmation is renewed.

6. The technical skills required are too demanding

"I'm fine with email and Microsoft Office apps. But I'm no techie and I don't have the time to learn to blog and tweet and whatever else is the technology du jour, especially when one little screw up can get broadcast to the whole world."

Colony [writes](#):

The average age of the world's top 100 CEOs is 59. This places them in the "typewriter and whiteout generation" -- many years removed from AOL Instant Messaging, Facebook, text messaging, and other early and late social technologies. Current CEOs lack affinity, knowledge, and comfort with social -- limiting their usage.

Yes, lack of comfort with the technology inhibits use among some older CEOs. But 59 is smack dab in the middle of the Baby Boom generation and the vast majority of Boomers are using email and texting with their cell phones. It also doesn't explain why the young guns of the social media companies cited earlier by Colony are less than avid users. These executives are not only extremely versed in social media but Williams (Blogger and Twitter) and Zuckerberg (Facebook) were among the creators of it.

The dearth of social media usage among executives is primarily because

executives of all generations have not considered how these technologies can be used as leadership tools. Either they tend to see them as marketing/public relations tools and therefore not appropriate for them to engage directly in frequently. Or they see them as social networking tools for which they have little time or tolerance.

And the techie stuff? It's a non issue, as the technology of composing a post for a blog is as simple as composing an email.

7. Once you blog something, you can't change your mind

"If I take a public position now on something that I may change my mind about later, I'll look like I've flip-flopped."

People respect authenticity in a leader so if you're genuinely approaching issues with a spirit of inquiry, your blogging can reflect that. Chronicling your learning about an issue is not only helpful to you, it can be a model for others.

Statements in a blog can be taken out of context and used against you like anything else you say or write. But the historical archive of a blog is also there to address false accusations. So you can't be stupid but you can be bold.

8. Blogging is narcissistic

"Too many people think they've got so many important things to say to the world so they decide to become bloggers. Most of it's drivel. I've got no such delusions of grandeur. My musings aren't that important."

In [Part 2 of his series](#), Colony writes:

With the exception of a small minority of brilliant thinkers, smart social networkers, and publishing-oriented personalities, the social heavy model is

a recipe for blowhardism.

The key question, however, is who's the intended audience for a leader who's frequently blogging and tweeting? If it's the world, then Colony's right. But leaders who blog can have a much narrower audience in mind with a strategic purpose.

In his book [Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us](#), author Seth Godin argues:

... great leaders focus on the tribe and only the tribe... They're generous. They exist to help the tribe find something, to enable the tribe to thrive. But they understand that the most powerful way to enable is to be stateworthy: by getting out front, by making a point, by challenging convention, and by speaking up. Those are brave acts, and bravery begets statues.

It's easy to hesitate when you're confronted with the feeling that maybe you're getting too much attention. Great leaders are able to reflect the light onto their teams, their tribes. Great leaders don't want the attention, but they use it. They use it to unite the tribe and to reinforce its sense of purpose... I could write an entire book about the power of a blog to disseminate a leader's ideas.

Your blog is best when you use it to leverage your important activities, ideas, and reflections *for those people within your immediate sphere of influence*—your tribe, not the whole world.

Conclusion

"A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special." - Nelson Mandela

One could imagine Mandela adding to his quote in the age of social media: "And now that you have a way to easily package and deliver your words at zero cost to those who matter to you, why not do it?"

That's what leadership blogging is all about: a practical approach to leveraging your values, mission, goals, and objectives through strategic, near real-time, short storytelling.

Next steps

- Visit [Blogging for Leaders](#) and watch a free 14-minute video in which I define leadership blogging as the art of strategic, near real-time, short storytelling
- Subscribe to the free [Blogging for Leaders email list](#) to receive announcements about leadership blogging-related webinars and online courses

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